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CAMILLE SAINT-SAËNS

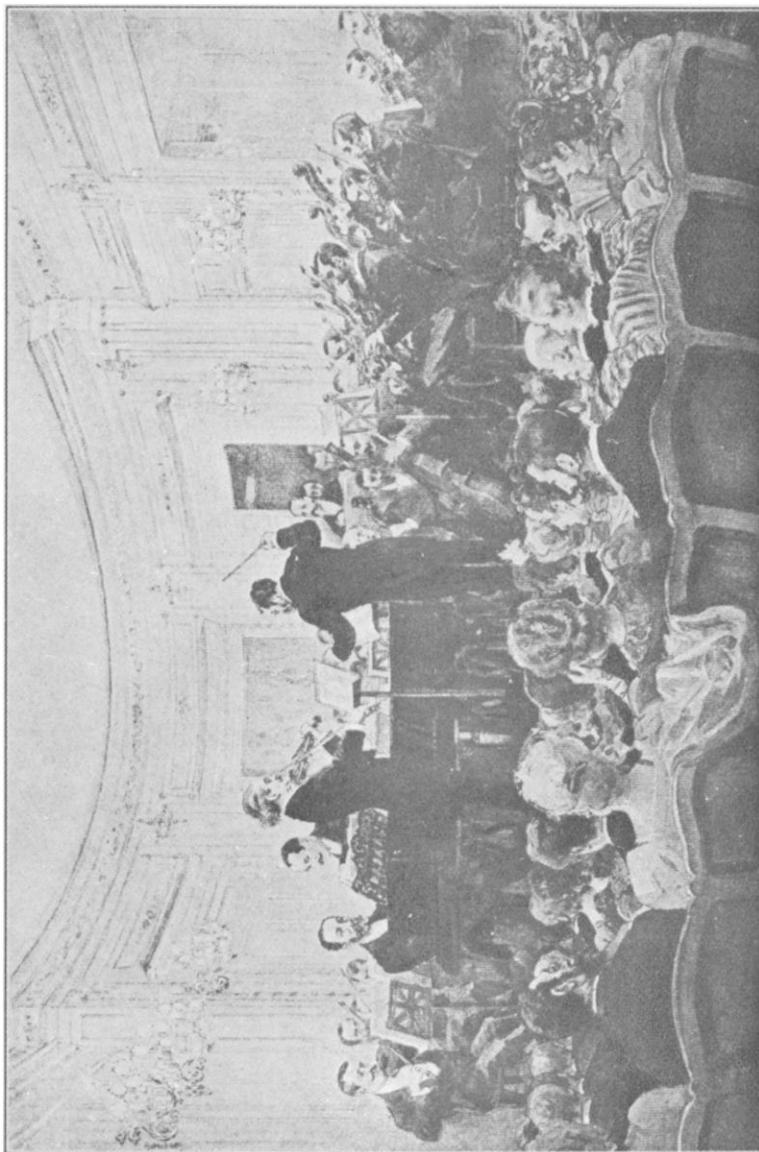
A CRITICAL ESTIMATE

By D. C. PARKER

HOW is one to do justice to Saint-Saëns? He has accomplished so much in every sphere of musical activity that the reviewer who would weigh and analyse all his works must share something of the astounding versatility of his subject. Born in 1835, when men were still discussing the death of La Fayette, he has been a force in music for over half a century. He is the most important link between the old world of Rossini, Meyerbeer, Auber and Gounod and the new one of the present decade. At the time of his birth the first productions of "Masaniello," "William Tell" and "Robert le Diable" were matters of recent history; and Saint-Saëns had proved himself a man of no small attainments when Gounod's "Faust" caused a stir in operatic circles. Over eighty years old—or should one not rather say young?—he has witnessed the rise and fall of many artistic *régimes*, and well within the span of his creative period innumerable events of importance to French dramatic music have taken place. "Mignon" appeared in 1866, "Djamileh," the beauty of which inspired him to a sonnet, in 1872, Massenet's charming "Manon" in 1884, "Louise" in 1900. The man who talked with Rossini and knew Berlioz still holds an honoured position in these days when Debussy, Erik Satie and Ravel are famous names. Doubtless he thinks with infinite zest of the fact that he was a prodigy who played the devil with the romantic idea. Doubtless he has learnt much as a close spectator of the pageant. He knows that every year students emerge from the Conservatoire full of a reforming zeal which is to set aright the musical universe. He knows equally well that men have a strange way of repeating their errors and that passing vogues die quickly. But it is not only as a link or an onlooker that he interests us. There is that in him which acts as a magnet and sends us to his works.

HIS PLACE.

How are we to place this strange apparition in French music? With him the valuation which is arrived at by analogy almost



*Le Grand Concert donné à la Salle Pleyel le 2 Juin 1896 par C. Saint-Saëns
avec les solistes de M. H. P. Laroche et R. Caillan
à l'occasion du Cinquantième de son Grand Concert salle Pleyel en 1856*

Le Grand Concert

Le Grand Concert

breaks down. Comparisons avail little. He has no real analogue. There is a kind of affinity with Liszt on which I shall enlarge later, but survey the names of his contemporaries and you will not discover one with whom, save at a few points, you can profitably compare him. Of his merits much has been said in high quarters. Berlioz, writing to H. Ferrand in January 1866, refers to him as "a great pianist, a great musician who knows his Gluck as well as I do." In another letter to the same, dated 11th June, 1867, he talks of "my young friend, Camille Saint-Saëns, one of the greatest musicians of our time." Auber, speaking of "Les Noces de Prométhée," which won a prize in 1867, declared that he was "a symphonist so sure of his method, so far removed from drudgery, of such an attractive manner, that I cannot name his equal amongst us." Gounod sang his praises again and again. "He is a man of weight," he stated, "he draws and paints his tone-pictures with the hand of a master." Von Bülow was impressed by the extent and accuracy of his knowledge. Bizet envied his adaptability. To Liszt's encouragement the materialisation of "Samson and Delilah" was due and to his influence the performance of the work at Weimar in 1877. It is recorded that once, when Liszt was asked to go to Paris, he answered significantly, "You have Saint-Saëns." The sage of the *rue de Vaugirard* did not always see eye to eye with that of the *rue de Longchamps*, but Massenet used Saint-Saëns's music in his composition class at the Conservatoire. So much for the musicians; the critics, however, put the composer under the microscope and attempt to set the scales of justice at the right angle. Romain Rolland refers to the double origin of his music and calls him one who has become "a classic during his life." M. Calvocoressi mentions the fact that his organ playing, while "remarkable for purity, perspicuity and ease," lacked "poetic intensity and fervour," and adds that "it is not only as a pianist that he reveals a certain coldness, an imperturbability greater than one is wont to meet with in musicians." De Solenière contrasts Massenet and Saint-Saëns. "The first," he tells us, "is all intuition and enthusiasm, the second all reason and learning." To him Saint-Saëns is "a scholastic" who represents the French desire to dissipate the legend of national frivolity in music.

It is obviously difficult to estimate accurately the value of a man who has been a classicist, a romanticist, an individualist with a great reverence for the past, a pedagogue of the best type, a partisan of programme music. Scanning his work as a whole we may form some idea of his historical position. To call a certain

kind of composer second rate is to court misconception. The familiar use of the term has debased it, but its legitimate employment does not imply any disparagement. Strictly speaking, to say that a man is a second rate artist is to assign him a very high place. The centuries have yielded but few writers of the first order. To declare, therefore, that Saint-Saëns is a composer belonging to the second category is, I think, to deal with him justly. To claim that he is the equal of Bach or Mozart, Gluck or Beethoven would be to give him a weighty reason for asking to be delivered from his friends. Colloquially he is a master; historically he is not.

THE CHARACTER OF HIS MUSIC.

The base on which his edifice is built is a solid one, and it is a thousand pities that more of our musical scaffolding is not set firmly upon it. Saint-Saëns's right to the title of a great musician is justified by reason of his thorough knowledge of the classics, a knowledge which constantly makes itself felt in his music. In these days, when there is so much irresponsible babbling concerning the heritage of the past, it is comforting to find a man who has often shown a human interest in it. That Saint-Saëns knows Rameau and the clavecinists generally, Bach and Handel, Haydn and Mozart, must be manifest to all who are familiar with his writings. His love for the classical giants and his sympathy with them form, so to speak, the foundation of his art. In addition, he is economical and has a fine sense of note-values which is almost Mozartian, so that we can rarely say of him, what is true of many others, that, while there are many notes, there is very little music. There is also in his works that which is peculiarly his own. It is difficult to catch, for he is very fond of exoticism, as witness the *Rhapsodie mauresque* of the "Suite Algérienne" with its *tambour basque* and triangle; and it is about this question that differences of opinion most commonly arise. What is it that he gives us which is peculiar to him alone? The question is not easy to answer because, while many of his best pages bear the stamp of his personality, one can guess the derivatives, and also because what he learns becomes a very real part of himself. (Gounod dwelt upon his marvellous talent for assimilation.) You can never say, "That is Saint-Saëns," as you can say, "That is Grieg," or "That is Chopin," and there is with him no pronounced characteristic such as the *mélodie massenetique*. He has not even a "manner" like Puccini, a man whose gift is of a lesser order. We must content ourselves with the remark that the physiognomy of

the composer seems most apparent to us when his music is graceful and touched with a pleasing sentiment, when the melody draws its sinuous curve over subtle harmonies, when you get the impression that he could have said the thing far more elaborately had it not been for the restraint which is native to him. A good example of this is to be found in the second subject of the first movement of the B minor Violin Concerto. Broadly speaking, he is epigrammatic. He illuminates by a flash. The *esprit gaulois* is not wanting. His method is that of Anatole France, not that of Zola or Mommsen. If you try to get at the kernel of the matter you will find that, like his own Omphale, he subdues by sweetness rather than by the strength of Hercules, though it is not untrue to say that the charm goes hand in hand with pronounced intellectual qualities.

It is a commonplace of criticism that extensiveness is purchased at the expense of intensiveness, and many who are temperamentally unsympathetic to Saint-Saëns would doubtless tell us that he employs his skill on things which are unworthy of it, that his legerdemain is squandered on poor tricks. There is a grain of truth in this contention, for the intrinsic value of his idea as an idea is not always so arresting as his treatment of it. But it would be unwise to declare that he has nothing to say. Certainly "La Jeunesse d'Hercule" contains a good deal of "made" music, but this still seems so if it be judged by the standard of his other symphonic poems, and I think that too much has been made of his facility and too little of the melodic value of his music; for, after all, a good number of themes of undoubted lyrical beauty can be found in his compositions, and this quite apart from their "workable" qualities. The view that his real contribution to his art is small is, however, tenaciously held in some quarters, and it appears far truer than it is because he has sedulously avoided joining his music to such things as freemasonry, theosophy and philosophy. A programme music writer he undoubtedly is, but he has no "message." There is no doctrine of redemption in his stage works, no hidden meaning in his orchestral ones, no interpretation of the universe in any page. All of which may conceivably put him out of court with those who look for Schopenhauer in arpeggios and grave warnings to mankind in the most innocent of motifs.

It is also urged that he is superficial, that profundity is unknown to him. It is true that you seldom feel that he has got down to the bedrock of things. We cannot apply to him the remark which Andrew Lang applied to Montaigne—"he is a

tired man's, not a fresh man's" author. We would not go to him in moments of spiritual crisis. The musical equivalent of Shakespeare's clowns is not to be found here. He is perhaps too anxious to be polite. In what he has penned the disorder fashioned by the world-genius is not to be found. The divine task of creating an imaginary universe out of chaos is reserved for the few. Nothing is more impressive than those pages which attain heights of beauty and passion from a seeming nothingness, than those passages in which a remote rumbling rises like the voices of an Athenian crowd and becomes gradually articulate and eloquent. In this matter, however, we must let him speak for himself. The charge of superficiality has often been levelled at Massenet. Saint-Saëns referred to this in an article. "Massenet," he wrote, "is not profound, and that has no importance at all Are charms and smiles to be considered useless? Oh, how many people I know who pretend to despise them and who, in their own hearts, regret that they do not possess them!" May we not fittingly apply these words to Saint-Saëns? There is, I think, something to be said for his view. The lesser function should not be entirely disregarded, and if we rule out men who are incapable of saying things of cosmic significance we shall have a very small circle of friends and shall cut ourselves off from much that adds to the richness of life. We know that great things are born with difficulty, that the consummate genius gives us the impression that his work is not only well but easily done. But to state that the natural flow of Saint-Saëns's music is not that of the man who sweats and wrestles with his idea in the direst agony is not to deny that it is extremely pleasing of itself. And few, surely, would go so far as to anathematise such things as the "Introduction and Rondo Capriccioso," "La Fiancéé du Timbalier," the "Suite Algérienne," the Variations for two pianofortes on a Theme of Beethoven (op. 35), and that dream of loveliness, the "Havaneise."

It would be foolish to say that the catholicity of Saint-Saëns and the ease with which he can change his manner do not offer a very dangerous pitfall into which he sometimes stumbles. Nature exacts the last cent for the gifts which she bestows. To the versatile musician the maintenance of a consistency of style is a very great difficulty. We cannot reproach a man for turning to the speech of Bach or Handel and prattling in the rough, human accents of these Titans. Such an exercise is often a joyful task to the creator. But we can reproach him when he goes to this and that period in the same work, when his architecture is, as it were, now Gothic, now Norman. In this matter Saint-Saëns is not

always innocent. There is a strong resemblance between Saint-Saëns the traveller and Saint-Saëns the composer. The former is deservedly famous for his many journeys. He has explored unfrequented places and nursed an affection for the South and the East. Where there is much sunshine and the vegetation is opulent he has often been found. His visits to the Canary Isles, Egypt, Algeria and Brazil are almost historical. But, like a true Frenchman, he always returns to Paris. Documentary evidence of these wanderings is present in his music, yet, on the written page, as in his itineraries, he always returns to Paris. His intellectual restlessness is the counterpart of his physical restlessness, and I think that we may claim that the power which urges him to speak to-day in an archaic manner and to unburden himself to-morrow in the romantic vocabulary is one with that which sends him to the vast emptiness of the desert, to the fragrant gardens of the tropics, for his mental refreshment. I agree with André Messager, who, as a former pupil of the doyen of French composers, knows his works better than most, when he says many things about "Samson and Delilah" which are to the credit of its creator. I agree also that Saint-Saëns is a man of taste. But it needs no special gift of discernment to perceive that the weakness of the work lies in a lack of unanimity of style. This is observable also in the G minor pianoforte concerto, which opens in the manner of Bach, but which soon launches into a more modern idiom. Perhaps the composer derives a certain pleasure from writing now and then in the contrapuntal style in keeping within self-imposed bounds. Perhaps he acts at the dictates of a whimsical caprice when, donning the cowl of the ascetic, he eschews some of the most useful modernisms. Perhaps he loves the best of all the schools so much that he cannot long neglect it and is, consequently, easily attracted by another polarity. Perhaps he has an unusual horror of boring his hearers. Whatever the causes, and those which I have mentioned may all be contributory, there is no doubt that the act of coquetting now with this, now with that manner, produces a cleavage in a work which counts as a mark against it.

The serenity of Saint-Saëns's mind is calculated to mislead the critic. I do not hesitate to say that there are pages in which the limitations imposed by it are all too apparent, for it is of a nature better calculated to assist the philosopher than the musician. Yet Saint-Saëns's fund of common sense has not prevented his indulging in those higher flights of fancy which are permitted to the artist. Indeed, the most charming thing about him is the fact that, while the possessor of a large store of learning such as

often provides ballast which prevents the spontaneous soaring of the spirit, he is invariably its master. The "glorious excess" of Keats is certainly absent—we would that there were something of it—but we cannot say that the pen which wrote Delilah's song of temptation or the climax of "La Cloche" was quite incapable of a real fervour. Again, such little pieces of sentiment as the prelude of "Le Déluge" do not seem startling in the light of modern works, chiefly, I think, because we can so easily trace its composer's footsteps. His scores are lucid and transparent and his methods clearly defined, in contradistinction to those of many of his successors who surround us with a maze of meaningless subtleties and live in a toy-shop furnished with unconventional gew-gaws. Much good music has been written in France in recent years—though this is a verdict which Saint-Saëns himself might not endorse—but I cannot help feeling that, in comparison with some of the moderns, he seems obvious and easy mainly because he is intelligible at all points. And it has still to be proved that intelligibility is a cardinal vice.

That he is a monster paradox is a fact which is impressed upon you when you study his works. Perceiving that he runs now towards Bach, now towards Gounod, now towards Liszt, now towards Franck, you can understand the difficulty which lies in the way of a fair valuation of him. Like a later Gossec, he has given a decided impetus to the production and study of symphonic music in France. And his activity in this direction probably retarded a complete understanding of him in some quarters. The home of the French musician was the theatre. French music was essentially a dramatic music. Is it not the first business of a Frenchman to be French? Thus the complainers. But it is a question if Saint-Saëns has not done his country a greater service by strengthening that in which she was admittedly weak. It is ominous that he did not make his operatic *début*, which was a timorous one, until he was well over thirty—a contrast to the rush of ambitious laureates towards the theatre; and that not a few of the pages in his stage works which have met with appreciation are those in which the instrumental, as distinct from the operatic, writer is prominent. Examples of this may be found in the Dance of the Priestesses and Bacchanal of "Samson and Delilah," the Valse and Pavane of "Etienne Marcel," the ballet airs of "Henry VIII," the triumphal March of "Déjanire," the Bourrée of "Javotte." Tchaikovsky's remark, in a letter of the 24th February, 1883, that he did not think that Saint-Saëns would ever write a great dramatic work, may have been prompted by the feeling that he was really an

orchestral composer most at home in the concert-hall. Certainly the most famous of his operas, such as "Étienne Marcel," "Henry VIII," "Proserpine," "Ascanio," "Déjanire," "Hélène," and "Les Barbares"—"Samson and Delilah" is an exception—have never achieved a complete success in spite of all his talent and resource. This circumstance must, I believe, be attributed to a cause to which I shall refer later. It is enough to say here that, for the public, Saint-Saëns means the "Introduction and Rondo Capriccioso," popularised by Sarasate; the Variations for two pianofortes on a Theme of Beethoven, which are masterly; the Symphony in C minor, dedicated to the memory of Liszt; the "Marche héroïque"; the Trio in F (op. 18), a work full of interest; the fascinating "Suite Algérienne"; the "Africa" Fantasia; "Le Rouet d'Omphale"; the "Danse Macabre," in which his Lisztian proclivities are given full rein—note the use of the xylophone, the harp and the "tuned" violin; "Phaëton"; "La Fiancée du Timbalier"; the B minor violin Concerto; and the two pianoforte ones in C minor and G minor respectively. This is a good budget, and if we add to it some of his best songs and such things as "Le Cygne" (an extract from a Carnival of Animals which easily bears comparison with Rebikov's amusing "Danse du quadrupède" from "Parmi eux" [op. 35]), and "Une Nuit à Lisbonne," a delightful fragment, it comprises a list to which he may well point with pride.

ARTISTIC CREED.

Much has been written of Saint-Saëns's versatility, of the plasticity of his mind and the eclecticism of his nature. There is, no doubt, some truth in the saying of Gounod that he could write in the style of Rossini, Schumann, Verdi or Wagner at will. The remark hints at a want of conviction, at a lack of artistic conscience. But Saint-Saëns's *credo* is a very definite thing. He has no stomach for schools which bind themselves down to certain laws. In the end it is not a man or a period but art itself to which he gives his homage. He abhors movements which express themselves in "isms." But his love of personal freedom must not be interpreted as a vague excuse for a policy of *laissez faire*. There is, as I have indicated, something elusive about him. He is a will-o'-the-wisp who does the unexpected thing at the unexpected time. You have no sooner convinced yourself that he is French in essence than you encounter passages which are derived from Bach. One page is rich in romantic charm, another full of mediæval austerity. He is like a protean actor who plays all the *rôles* himself. And

so, while he appears to one a tragedian, to another he seems a child of the comic muse. He is fond of mystifying his hearers and disguising himself in strange costumes. It is this propensity together with his fondness for detachment which have given birth to the belief that Saint-Saëns has no very decided views. The variety of his works is, however, due to the wide range of his vision,¹ and it will be allowed that few men have taken more trouble to define their artistic positions. In this connection two matters deserve attention; they are his attitudes to modernism and to the Wagnerian movement. The length of Saint-Saëns's active musical life and his productiveness during it have been responsible for several whimsical facts. Thus we find that, in his youth, he was dubbed an extremist. In these days he is popularly regarded as being out of sympathy with music *à la mode*. More than once he has found himself in the strange position of being renounced alike by the reactionaries and by the impatient progressivists. We now know well enough that the only extreme thing about him is his moderation. "Avoid all exaggeration," he has written, "and strive to maintain the entirety of intellectual health." And if he does not adopt the latest methods of the younger generation, if he does not throw in his lot with those who have overdone the use of syncopations and who are too much enamoured of the augmented fifth, it is emphatically because he does not want to, not because he could not if he wished. He is not against experimentalism, as those who play his "Carillon" (*quasi campane*, $\frac{7}{4}$ in a bar) and know the first movement of the "Suite Algérienne," "In Sight of Algiers," are aware; and such excerpts as the "Air des Abeilles" ("L'Ancêtre") suggest that it was in his power to write in the style of his successors if he had so willed. The point to observe is that his attitude does not arise from a love of weak-kneed compromises. If he dwell in what now seems the house of conservatism rather than in that of the ultra-modernists it is because his equilibrium cannot be disturbed. Passing fads leave him unmoved. The fevers of the artistic world do not attack him. He is always able to steer his own course. His independence is a very real thing. In the midst of his orthodoxy he often runs wild. The guarded speech which prevails in "The Promised Land" did not prevent his giving a very pictorial rendering of the water rising from the rock at the bidding of Moses. But he keeps before him, as it were, a picture of Athens, and this image teaches him much. He has a conception of beauty

¹With Saint-Saëns one is conscious of the European tradition. By studying his artistic personality we realise the value of the heritage of Latin civilisation.

to which he constantly aspires. No one knows better than he that he might have gained a world-wide notoriety by utilising methods which cause violent fluttering in the dovecots of the musical world. Let us give him credit for his restraint. Excess in art is to him unpardonable. In this he is a Hellene. It has been said that art is exaggeration and, at the first blush, the statement seems irreconcilable with the tenets of those who counsel moderation. But generalities are frequently misleading and we have to use them with discretion. If we apply the saying that art is exaggeration to the romantic and modern writers we find full justification for it; and we may even go so far as to declare that proof of the truth of it is furnished by many composers, commonly called classical, whose music owes its effect to the employment of things which would be quite out of place, if not actually offensive, in the works of lesser musicians. To the genius the unlawful thing is permitted. It is to the splendid prodigality of such men that we are indebted for many of the greatest moments in musical literature. The Gargantuan conceptions of Berlioz, the most notable experiments of Liszt, the emotional climaxes of Wagner and Richard Strauss were possible only to men who allowed themselves the larger liberty and were keenly conscious of their power to reach heights that are commonly held to be out bounds. But truth is a relative thing, and we dare not forget Max Stirner's motto. Without inconsistency the critic may give his benediction to those who hold the two views, because, in the end, the justification of theories about music lies in the practical outcome of them. In any case, you cannot force rules upon a strong creative nature. Some can best express themselves by adhering to the classical idea which urges thrift and makes for simplicity; others by adhering to the modern which countenances an indulgence in extravagance without which their speech would be cramped and artificial. So far from deplored the existence of the two creeds, we should rejoice in them. The only occasion for regret is when we meet with a man who adopts the one and who, we consider, could have best revealed himself by taking a greater latitude. It is fortunate, then, that Saint-Saëns knows that, so far as he is concerned, the maximum effect is not to be obtained by ladling out the riches indefinitely as at some Roman orgy, but by withholding them at the proper moment. In such matters he has a sure sense of the right thing. His instinct tells him when to stop. He possesses the valuable gift of being able to arrest the course of his music when it ought to be arrested. He recognises that enough is too much, that art is selection.

The truth is that he stands very much where he stood thirty or forty years ago. While, paradoxically enough, the attraction of others has made itself felt in his work, it can be proved that he has been left untouched by many influences. Precocity often leaves little room for expansion, but history shows many examples of a march from strength to strength which is bewildering. With Saint-Saëns we are not at all conscious of the chain of periods which is so easily distinguished in some cases—the initial period, the transitional period, the periods of personal confidence and complete maturity—and it is impossible to say that at such a work one ended and another began. Of course experience tells and familiarity with his tools helps the craftsman. But the "Introduction and Rondo Capriccioso" (op. 28) was written in 1863, "Le Rouet d'Omphale" (op. 31) in 1871, the "Danse Macabre" (op. 40) in 1874, and it is a question if the technique of the later works is greater if we regard it as being the means to an end. Again, there is no real difference between "Le Déluge" (op. 45), which dates from 1875, and "The Promised Land" (op. 140) first performed in England in 1913. How many, I wonder, could guess that "Phaëton" (op. 39), composed in 1873, was written some fourteen years before the "Havanaise"? This stationariness is best illustrated by the following table:

| <i>Saint-Saëns</i> | <i>Other French Composers</i> | <i>Wagner and Strauss.</i> | | <i>Verdi.</i> |
|---|-------------------------------------|----------------------------|---------------|---------------------------|
| (Dates of composition except in the case of operas which are those of productions.) | | (dates of production.) | | |
| Trio in F (op. 18) 1868 | La Statue (Reyer.) 1861 | Tristan and Isolde 1865 | | La Forza del Destino 1862 |
| Pianoforte Concerto in C minor 1875 | | Die Meistersinger 1868 | | Don Carlos 1867 |
| Samson and Delilah 1877 | | Das Rheingold 1869 | | Aida 1871 |
| La Jeunesse d'Hercule 1877 | | Die Walküre 1876 | | |
| Étienne Marcel 1879 | | Siegfried 1876 | | |
| Suite Algérienne 1880 | | Götterdämmerung 1876 | | |
| Violin Concerto in B minor 1880 | | | | |
| Henry VIII 1883 | | Parsifal 1882 | | |
| Symphony in C minor 1886 | Le Cid (Massenet.) 1885 | Aus Italien 1886 | | |
| Ascanio 1890 | Salammbo 1890 | Tod und Verklärung 1889 | Otello 1887 | |
| Suite for pianoforte 1891 | (Reyer.) | | | |
| Phryné 1893 | Le Rêve (Bruneau.) 1891 | | | |
| Souvenir d'Ismailia 1895 | Werther 1892 (Massenet.) | | | |
| | L'Attaque du Moulin (Bruneau.) 1893 | | Falstaff 1893 | |

I am far from reproaching Saint-Saëns in this matter, but have dwelt upon it because it explains why he has, at times, fallen foul of both camps. In justice to him it ought to be made perfectly

clear that he is not a reactionary like Brahms. If he find little to recommend it in the music of certain aspects of up-to-dateness, he harbours no vain superstitions about the past. His attitude to programme music is evidence of this. As I have said, he has some affinity with Liszt. An interest in the classics in general and in Bach in particular we find in both. Both will be remembered as ardent advocates of the right kind of modernism, and their music, craving, as it does, for light and air, is solisequious. A deep current of sympathy united the two artists. If Saint-Saëns sat at the feet of Liszt, Liszt, on his part, gave practical proof of his admiration. Without him we should never have had "*Samson and Delilah*." It was the independence of Liszt which appealed most strongly to the younger man, who, like his great forerunner, ploughed a lonely furrow. It may be to the impression which Liszt made upon him that we owe the two groups of six pieces (op. 52 and op. 111) which, designed to exploit some technical point—one is on major and minor thirds, one on chromatics, one on rhythm, and so on—remind us of the Abbé's transcendental studies. Be this as it may, the symphonic poems show definitely Saint-Saëns's position as regards programme music. The symphonic poems of Liszt were written between 1847 and 1859, those of Saint-Saëns between 1871 and 1877. It is interesting to note the difference. Liszt was readier to indulge in experimentalism on a large scale than his younger colleague has ever been, and both his themes and his treatment of them are more ambitious. The important matter is not this but the fact that there is no antagonism of creed. Liszt was a pioneer and the faults of his works are those of pioneer works. Saint-Saëns had the inestimable advantage of knowing the whole of Liszt's series before he wrote his first example, so it is not surprising that his four essays in this form strike us as being more concise and concentrated. We do not feel with him, as we sometimes do with Liszt, that he is improvising on the orchestra in the grand manner. In them we see that Saint-Saëns has a keen sense of form, that he knows well that a work is not necessarily formless because it is not measured out in the orthodox method of which those who hold sonata form in superstition are never tired of talking. No one, in fact, has dealt with the question of programme music more lucidly than Saint-Saëns. The article on Liszt in his volume "*Harmonie et Mélodie*" is full of such commonsense that it ought to be read aloud at least once a year in all music schools. He finds "*Les Préludes*" satisfying if judged by a purely musical standard and epitomises the whole problem in the words, "Is the music itself

good or bad? That is everything." In his pronouncements on this much discussed topic those to whom every composer of programme music is a kind of pariah will find much on which to reflect.

Turning to the Wagnerian question we see that here also Fate has played him a strange trick. In his youth labelled a Wagnerian, many now consider that he is not so bold as Wagner was, that a good deal of his music is, in fact, pre-Wagnerian. I am certain that the reproach of being old-fashioned will worry him just as little as the reproach of being a dangerous character troubled him in his youth. When Wagnerian dragons first breathed their chromatic fire at the gates of Montparnasse and coiled their interminable tails round the villas of Passy their arrival caused much stir in the musical world of Paris. I believe it to be true that Saint-Saëns has not changed, but public opinion in France has materially altered. We can imagine that a man who was scholarly—for a large number of the French musicians of the past were merely excellent amateurs—and who had a symphonic sense which is not common among the Latins, was suspect in time past. That part of his music which owes something to the Germany of the Reformation may have put the critics on the wrong scent, and it is possible that the fact that his compositions were played in the enemy's camp, if I may put it so, gave some sort of endorsement to the hasty judgment of a section of the press. When Saint-Saëns was in his prime the Parisian public had a very loose notion of what Wagnerism meant, and the composer was not alone in being victimised by loquacious ignorance. Bizet's innocuous "Djamileh" was considered to show a Wagnerian tendency, a circumstance which is amazing to anyone who takes the trouble to examine the score. Saint-Saëns made his position clear in 1885. "I admire profoundly the works of Richard Wagner in spite of their eccentricity," he wrote. More important than this was the affirmation, "I have not belonged to, I do not belong to and I shall never belong to the Wagnerian religion"—a statement which is supplemented by his comment that "Wagnerophobia" is a disease. Passing from these verbal expressions to his music I find nothing with which to reproach him on this score. Wagner opened up new possibilities and added to the current coin of musical expression, and I do not think that you can fairly charge a man with being a Wagnerian, that is if you use the word in the derogatory sense, because you discover here and there an atmosphere similar to that of "Tannhäuser," a mood which approximates to that of "Lohengrin." In one part of the finale of the B minor violin

concerto you may detect some resemblance to the "Lohengrin" style, but to throw the epithet at Saint-Saëns because of this is the height of folly. More might be said on this subject. One might enlarge upon Paderewski's apt remark that in music absolute originality does not exist, or upon the question of the "leading theme," which device appeared in its French guise, the *idée fixe*, in Berlioz's "Symphonie Fantastique" as early as 1830 and is also present in "Le Prophète," but in these days the student should be able to put such matters right for himself. The Wagnerian feud is now long past and we can see at leisure much that was difficult to discern amid the dust of the fray. Notwithstanding his polymathic qualities it is plain that if Saint-Saëns be deeply indebted to any composers of the German school it is to Bach, Handel and Mozart.

Saint-Saëns has a definite notion of what an opera ought to be and holds that dramatic music tends to become a synthesis of song, declamation and symphony. He allows himself considerable freedom in choice of subjects. "Ascanio" and "Henry VIII," for example, are historical, and in this we see a departure from the Wagnerian system. The music of all his operas gives food for thought because, while the value of it as such is not disputed and his facility in handling large masses is recognised, the works have never, as I have said, gained a firm place in the affections of the theatre-going public, though such things as the famous quartet in "Henry VIII" and the trio at the end of the first act of "Samson and Delilah" have been praised many times. The relationship between the voices and the orchestra is Italian rather than German. He uses the *leitmotif*, but has a bias toward the past. Here, perhaps, the middle course which he has taken has told against him. The intensely dramatic and vivid style of Verdi is highly effective in the theatre, the elaborate style of Wagner equally so; and it has been by these two men that the tastes of modern operatic devotees have, in the main, been fashioned. Saint-Saëns is neither Verdian nor Wagnerian, so that a feeling of disappointment may be engendered in those who look for the quick penetration of the Italian or the subtle characterisation of the German, especially as the Frenchman, with all his concert-room prestige, has evidently not been able to provide anything which the public could fasten on as a substitute. In modern times there has not, I think, been a case of a prominent man showing equal gifts as a symphonic and as an operatic writer. The dramatic Mozart is a greater man than the symphonic one. In the canon quartet of "Fidelio" Beethoven wrote a piece which, of

itself, is beautiful, but which, operatically considered, is a crude blunder such as Verdi would never have committed. Tchaikovsky's operas have not gained him the fame that has come to him through his orchestral works. Bizet had a natural talent for the theatre, as the power of "Carmen" testifies, yet he longed for that ability, which his friend Saint-Saëns possessed, to shine in the concert-hall. It is not necessary to cite other examples, for it is obvious that both dramatic and symphonic composition have difficulties peculiar to themselves.

So perhaps those who clamored for an epoch-making work from Saint-Saëns were crying for the moon or demanding that he should play the "complete man" of the Renaissance. But I hardly think that we go far astray when we say that the reason why he has never opened up new paths as Debussy has done in "Pelléas and Mélisande"—a work about which much can be said for and against—is to be sought largely in his violent dislike of schools, in a feeling which prevents his giving a definite "throw" in any particular direction; and one sometimes questions whether, in these times, it is possible for an opera to exhibit any real vitality unless it reveal a decided bias or have a "grip" which holds the attention. Here I would say that this is not a matter on which we can dogmatise, and I merely suggest an explanation, the validity of which may be tested by examining the nature of the problems with which the dramatic composer is confronted.

THE CRITIC.

The activities of Saint-Saëns in the field of criticism cannot properly be disregarded. The valuations of many composers are misleading. The nature of their occupation does not help them to judge men calmly and deal with them according to their merits. As many know, Saint-Saëns is an exception. I do not suppose that we should subscribe to all that any critic, however good, has written, and when the French composer tells us that Gounod's "Redemption" and "Mors et Vita" will show future generations what a great musician he was I can only say that I violently disagree with him. This does not prevent my recognising that, in his published works, there is much good sense and a proof of that intimate knowledge of all the phases of his art to which I have referred; not that he relies upon technical jargon. There is a liberal sprinkling of Attic salt. He throws light upon his subject by a certain picturesqueness of expression and by sundry

quaint touches which arrest the reader. He presses home his argument by many a *bon mot*, some of which have become common property. There is a sting in his words and a vein of scepticism in some of his passages which may easily be misunderstood. When the unreflective are busy with their acclamations or denunciations, Saint-Saëns is engaged in the work of examination; and it is the difference between the method of the crowd and that of the master which causes some to declare him guilty of occasional cynicism. Now and again he epitomises his views in an aphorism which might have come from the lips of Voltaire himself, and the definite manner in which he records his likes and dislikes has made him many enemies, though, as in the case of Vincent d'Indy, it has not tempted the author to pay idle compliments. When it seemed necessary to him he has explained his own work, though far less copiously than Wagner did. In such moments, as when he declared, "I am passionately fond of liberty" ("Harmonie et Mélodie"), we get a sincere confession from him. But most readers will find the greatest refreshment in scanning the prose compositions in which he passes judgment on other composers. His estimates of Liszt and Wagner will be fairly clear after what I have said. He has spoken of Palestrina and Bach, and shown not only an acquaintance with their music but, what is infinitely rarer, a familiarity with the musical thought and the current opinions of their periods. He has an uncommon sense of historical perspective. Rossini and Offenbach have their share of attention, and it will surprise some to find that the former, who is remembered in many quarters simply by his famous *crescendo*, is not dismissed with a shrug of the shoulders. To the article on Massenet, which appeared in "L'Echo de Paris" in October, 1912, I have already referred. It is, in its own way, a masterpiece. He makes plain that, for him, the typical Massenet theme has no particular attraction, but it is worth while recalling that, in 1872, he recorded for "Marie Magdeleine" "the greatest success of the most audacious experiment made by a musician since Berlioz's 'L'Enfance du Christ'" —a verdict which carries weight, for Saint-Saëns does not employ the honeyed phrases of the courtier. Through the medium of "Le Courrier Musical" in 1905 a certain kind of modernism came in for a severe trouncing, and in the pages of "Le Franco-Californien" one may discover an erudite discourse on the execution of old music which is worthy of the editor of M.-A. Charpentier's "Le Malade imaginaire," Gluck's "Echo and Narcissus" and Rameau's works. The author of "Harmonie et Mélodie" and "Portraits et Souvenirs" is no aggressive solipsist. The final

test may be described in words of his own: "Is the music itself good or bad?" Notable is the confession that it is not Bach or Beethoven whom he loves, but art itself. And when he declares that the house of Apollo has many mansions we can only say that he has good reason to speak thus. For no man has lodged more comfortably in its spacious halls.